

# William R. Freudenburg as student

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Here I am, 80 years old, and having to come to terms with the preposterous idea that Bill Freudenburg died before turning 60. Professors are not meant to outlive their students. That is not part of the contract.

He and I were in fairly continuous contact for almost 40 of those 60 years. My original assignment in this collection was to write something about Bill as a student. He sometimes called me his mentor, and I am wholly comfortable with that. But I was also an onlooker over the decades as he grew and expanded and evolved; and before his time was up, I discovered that I was reaching out to him for guidance at least as often as he was turning to me. I wanted to get that part of the story in, too, so I propose now to reach into that flow of memory and offer three sketches. Bill as graduate student. Bill as young professional. Bill as seasoned elder.

## One

A lean and earnest young man walks into my office. He looks intently at me for what seems like a long minute without saying anything at all. “Silent” is not one of the adjectives that comes quickly to mind when one remembers Bill, but that was my first experience of him, and I was learning for the first time how much he could take in with one of those glances of his. It was almost as if he listened with his eyes as well as his ears.

When he did begin to speak (it could only have been a few seconds later), words came out in urgent bursts, almost tumbling over each other as they poured into the room. This was Yale in the early 1970s. I was accustomed to graduate students who looked at the social world as though it had been filtered through the professional screens we were teaching them about—the theorems and propositions they planned to test, the methods they planned to use, and the literatures they planned to draw on. But this student wanted to talk about a town in Wyoming and the fascinating things that seemed to be happening there and how interesting it would be to learn more about it. He would have to go there, of course, and talk to folks, get some sense of the rhythm of their lives, the order of their days, and... It was an amazing cascade of words, and not a one of them sounded as though it had been sifted through those filters. I was in the presence of true originality. He spoke of ways of looking and of intellectual sensibilities that were—there is no other way of saying this—*him*. The conversation was to last 40 years. When it was his turn to seek an academic position a few years later, I wrote in my letter of recommendation that he was on the verge of becoming “a major sociological voice.” I do not know if I qualify as a good mentor, but I was one hell of a talent scout.

As Bill became a wise and experienced and weathered 60, he was still talking that way. A friend of us both, who knew Bill as a fellow student and encountered him now and then over the years that followed, said of him: “He was always himself—all right there in front of you.” Exactly.

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## Two

Ten years go by. I am invited to join a group being formed called the Technical Review Committee of the Nuclear Waste Project Office, State of Nevada. At issue was a recent decision by the US government to entomb high level nuclear wastes in an underground repository at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. It was Bill who called me about the committee. He had become, in his middle 30s, a highly regarded consultant to the State of Nevada, in part because of his research on that town in Wyoming, and in part because his sensitivity to problems of the environment had become more widely known and appreciated. The committee was a gathering of some of the most thoughtful experts ever brought together in one place on the topic of nuclear power and its impact on human life, and it was to meet with some regularity for a decade or more. I think it is fair to say that it added in a substantial way to the maturity of national thinking about the disposal of nuclear wastes.

Bill sat at the outer edges of the room when the committee met, but, in his own way, he occupied its center. One of my memories of him during that time also involved silences. Among his responsibilities was to listen—really listen—to long reports from the various people and groups who had done research on behalf of the State, and then to listen—really listen—to the comments of members of the Technical Review Committee. And when I say *listen*, I mean attending with every fiber of his being. Most of us who experience such meetings have learned how to focus intently when something important seems to be on the table and then to drift off into moments when we do the equivalent of turning our hearing aids down. Bill had to listen with care to every syllable spoken for days on end because one of his jobs was to interrupt from time to time with summaries of what had happened thus far, reminders that we had been drifting from the matter at hand, suggestions as to where the conversation might turn next, and references to research out there in the literature that bore on our mission. This was done so fluidly and with such understatement that we almost took it for granted, not fully realizing until later how much the committee's work depended on those efforts. We live in a professional world where people often draw attention to themselves without even knowing that they are doing so—posturing, strutting, and fanning feathers. But Bill, one of the youngest of us and yet one of the best informed, never allowed us to drift too far from the task at hand, and he did that without any flourishes. I think all of us who were a part of that experience would agree that, once gathered together, we were an impressive collectivity, but we would all agree as well that Bill played an essential role in assembling its parts, keeping it in motion, and shaping its end product.

Bill and I once took a tour of several days around that vast, fenced-off portion of southern Nevada reserved for federal uses. The purpose of the trip was to get to know that landscape a bit better in the event that we decided to send more researchers out into it. We drove through old ghost towns with decaying opera houses; a tavern where people at the bar in the middle of the morning told us of aliens from outer space they had seen in the desert; neighborhood brothels with pickups parked in front, their identifying license plates easy to make out from the local street; and a restaurant called Mozart's where Bill complained quietly but colorfully of a steak that had been served to him, thin as shoe leather and about as tender, not realizing that the proprietor was standing right behind him. It was an important trip.

It was about that time that I first began to hear about a wondrous creature named Sarah.

## Three

The scene now shifts to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. It is many years later. Bill is now 55 or so. Hurricane Katrina, having twisted itself into a concentrated knot of fury, crashed into the Louisiana coast. A group of us who shared an interest in disasters and risk assessment had been meeting for quite some time by then, usually in New Orleans, and I had volunteered the group's services to begin what turned out to be a broad study of the effects of the catastrophe on the people who had been exposed to it. We met a few days after Katrina. Rita, her cruel sister, had not yet made an appearance. Our meeting place was Bob Gramling's house in Lafayette. There was not a motel room or a conference site available within a hundred miles of New Orleans. Bob supplied air mattresses, courtesy of the American Sociological Association. A map of the household sleeping arrangements for the 2 days that followed: Under the dining room table, Bill Freudenberg; under the kitchen table, Steve Kroll-Smith; on the living room floor, Steve Picou; and in other niches scattered here and there—Shirley Laska, Bob Gramling, and me. Each of us found a different way to get to Lafayette through that devastation. What began that day is another story for another time, but I want to close these remarks with a memory that will never leave me. The person who had walked into my office 35 years earlier was young still. He had greyed and grown an impressive beard, but he was now an elder—in stature if not in age—and occupying the center of our councils as if drawn there by a law of gravity.

There is a great empty space where Bill Freudenberg used to be. It will not be filled in our time.